

1450-1950: The Gutenberg Galaxy According to Bob Brown

In the summer of 1929 the Paris-based Black Sun Press (formerly known as Editions Narcisse) run by Caresse and Harry Crosby, published a slim volume of hand-drawn images and handwritten texts by a fellow American named Bob (Robert Carlton) Brown. Titled *1450-1950*, and printed in a run of 150 copies (subsidized by the author), Brown's book is, one might say, the very antitype of the high-end books that the press is known for.¹ Printed by the Parisian "Maître-Imprimeur" Roger Lescaret, and using only the optimum quality papers, inks, and bindings, the Black Sun Press titles by, among others, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, and Hart Crane are notable for the exceptional quality of their production.² Compared to these prime specimens of what Jerome McGann considers modernist extensions of "the late nineteenth-century Renaissance of Printing," Brown's manuscript is seemingly artless, amateurish, and, at times, illegible.³ Brown's "whimsical, instinctively deconstructive picture poems in holograph," as Cary Nelson describes them, pay little heed to typographical propriety

¹ Hugh Ford, *Published in Paris: American and British Writers, Printers, and Publishers in Paris, 1920-1939* (New York: Macmillan, 1975), 198.

² Lescaret is credited in the Black Sun Press colophons as "Maître-Imprimeur Lescaret." Under German occupation in World War II, Lescaret put his printing skills in service of the French Resistance's clandestine press *Imprimeries Clandestines* and was imprisoned in an internment camp in the village of Rouillé, southwest of Poitiers. See Julien Blanc, *Au Commencement de la Résistance: Du Côté du Musée de l'Homme 1940-1941* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2010), 185.

³ Jerome McGann, *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 76.

or bibliographical decorum.⁴ As a result, the “categories of high art, seriousness, representation, and literariness” are, Nelson suggests, “all at risk” in *1450-1950* (173). So too is the sanctity of the book itself. To use Brown’s own trope, *1450-1950* is, this essay contends, the distracting “FLY SPECK” on the “NEW” typeset page of modernism.⁵ But as well as questioning the dominance of typography in modernism’s “Revolution of the Word,” Brown’s figurative flyspeck, this essay argues, also inadvertently foregrounds a series of racialized and gendered assumptions that have not only tarnished (indelibly so) but also enabled what McGann calls “the visible language of modernism.”

(Fig 1)

In this respect, *1450-1950* constitutes a prolegomenon to the new reading technologies that Brown would soon after promote in his more widely known project, *The Readies*.⁶ If, as Jessica Pressman claims, these later essays and books of Brown’s

⁴ Cary Nelson, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 171.

⁵ Bob Brown, *1450-1950*, ed. Craig Saper (1959, rpt. Baltimore, MD: Roving Eye Press, 2015), n.p. All subsequent references refer to this unpaginated edition of *1450-1950* unless stated otherwise.

⁶ There are three published versions of *The Readies*, all of which outline Brown’s ideas and reasons for his invention of a new reading machine. The first, a short essay, was published in 1930 in the little magazine *transition: an international quarterly for creative experiment*. This was followed by an extended version of the same essay, which Brown’s Roving Eye Press published in 1930. Craig Saper, under the auspices

“invite us to consider how reading has a medial history that is part of literature and literary history,” then *1450-1950* is itself indexical of the prejudices and discriminations tacitly shaping this history.⁷ Building on Michael North’s ideas regarding the fallible utopic scope of Brown’s visible language, and the way in which “race is intrinsic to his innovations,” this essay examines how Brown’s problematic representations of race and gender in *1450-1950* might betray a set of broader assumptions concerning “otherness” as it occurs in the materiality of print.⁸

By playfully reflecting on its own material processes of expression, and by subverting the typographic medium of print, *1450-1950* draws significant attention to some ideological biases that are deeply impressed in the medial history of Western literature. The “recursive relationship between literature and reading machines,” including Brown’s *Readies*, Pressman writes, “opens up new directions for writing literary history” (77). Without contesting such a claim, the imbedded prejudices and

of the re-launched Roving Eye Press, reprinted a facsimile of this edition in 2014. *Readies for Bob Brown’s Machine* followed in 1931, published by Roving Eye Press, which includes specially commissioned texts for Brown’s Reading Machine. Contributors included Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, and Nancy Cunard. A critical facsimile edition of *Readies for Bob Brown’s Machine* edited by Saper and Eric M. White was published in 2019.

⁷ Jessica Pressman, *Digital Modernism: Making It New in New Media* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 71.

⁸ Michael North, *Camera Works: Photography and the Twentieth-Century Word* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 80. See also Michael North, “Words in Motion: The Movies, the Readies, and the ‘Revolution of the Word,’” *Modernism/modernity* 9, no. 2 (2002): 205-223, 218.

blind spots evident in *1450-1950*'s own medial history of the book reminds its reader that, in order to open up "new directions for writing literary history," the recursive relationship between literature and literacy also requires a level of *re-medial* intervention that will heed the errors and omissions in extant reading practices, technologies, and mediums.

Colophon

In 1959, thirty years after the publication of Black Sun Press edition of *1450-1950*, two small presses associated with the "New American" poetry of the period—Jargon Books in North Carolina and Corinth Books in New York City—co-published a new edition of Brown's book in a relatively larger run of 15000 copies. The initiator of the new edition, Jonathan Williams, had re-galvanized his Jargon press while a student at Black Mountain College, publishing fellow Black Mountaineers such as Charles Olson and Robert Creeley. It was also at Black Mountain where Williams first encountered *1450-1950*. Caresse Crosby, having published Olson's *Y&X* in 1950, brought with her a rare copy of Brown's book while visiting the campus. The scarcity of Brown's "utterly charming and singular book," Williams writes, was "a measure of the almost cultish regard [it] commanded from its contemporaries."⁹

1450-1950 would have resonated with Williams's broader interests in the graphic dimensions of poetry, particularly his longstanding regard for the maverick poet and novelist Kenneth Patchen. By 1959, Williams had already published several titles by Patchen who Ronald Johnson, another Jargon poet, would later dub "a

⁹ Jonathan Williams, "1450-1950," in Bob Brown, *1450-1950* (1959, rpt. New York: Jargon and Corinth Books, 1959), np.

homegrown Blake” and “a true American product.”¹⁰ The visionary force of Patchen’s hand-painted or hand-drawn picture poems might recall the illuminated books of William Blake but the “round rolling scrawl” of Patchen’s “anti-calligraphy” also evokes the manuscript style of *1450-1950*.¹¹

Williams considered Brown, along with Brown’s good friend Mina Loy, one of “the writers that need to be restored, in order that we young poets know what’s been happening.”¹² Williams’s instinct was right. The publication of the new edition of *1450-1950* coincided with the crest of the International Concrete Poetry Movement and the subsequent strains of post-concrete poetry that followed it. By 1965 Augusto de Campos had written an enthusiastic essay about the Jargon reprint and later still, in 1972, Bern Porter (who had corresponded with Brown in the mid-1940s) dedicated his book *Waste Maker* to both Brown and Patchen. Shortly after, in 1974, Jerome Rothenberg featured Brown’s work, including selections from *1450-1950*, in his anthology *Revolution of the Word: A New Gathering of American Avant-Garde Poetry, 1914-1945*. In doing so Rothenberg, like Williams and de Campos before him, reaffirmed Brown’s rightful place in the modernist milieu from which he had been largely omitted.

¹⁰ Ronald Johnson, “Hurrah For Euphony: Dedicated to Young Poets” (1994), *The Cultural Society* (2002): <http://culturalsociety.org/texts/prose/hurrah-for-euphony-dedicated-to-young-poets/>.

¹¹ James Schevill, “Kenneth Patchen: The Search for Wonder and Joy,” *The American Poetry Review* 5, no. 1 (1976): 32-36, 32.

¹² Jonathan Williams, letter to Bob Brown, April 7, 1958. Bob Brown Papers (Box 108, Collection 723). UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library.

“For this new edition,” Williams writes in the Jargon edition, “Bob Brown has made a few additions for good measure” (“1450-1950,” np). What Williams does not state, however, is that Brown also made some omissions, including the original edition’s list of fifty-plus recipients that Brown nominated for free copies of *1450-1950*.¹³ Brown also omits his original “HAND-LETTERED” colophon:

COLOPHON
PRINTED IN THE YEAR
GUTENBERG 479
GOING ON 500 YEARS
A LITTLE NEGRO BOY BEING
DUELY RUBBED OVER THE
TYPE TO GIVE THE PROPER COLOR
AND AFTERWARD DESTROYED
ALL PAINFULLY HAND-LETTERED
BY AUTHOR HIMSELF
AT THE AGE OF 43
GOING ON 50 YEARS
IN PARIS
THANK GOD ¹⁴

¹³ The list includes Ezra Pound, Mina Loy, Kaye Boyle, James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, Edgar Varese, Carl Sandburg, and E. E. Cummings. Porter would later emulate the method of Brown’s list in *Waste Maker*.

¹⁴ Bob Brown, *1450-1950* (Paris: Black Sun Press, 1929), np. Michael North quotes from Brown’s Black Sun Press colophon in *Camera Works*, 81.

Although commercial publishing had largely abandoned the device, the colophon, Shef Rogers writes, “remained a feature of fine press printing to acknowledge the book’s makers, to highlight the quality of the materials used to make the book, and, in limited editions, to record the book’s place in the numbered series.”¹⁵ Whereas other Black Sun Press colophons announce the use of high quality paper such as Japanese Vellum or Hollande Van Gelder, the colophon in *1450-1950* does not advertise its materiality. With the exception of the cream covers and their use of red and black ink, the original edition of *1450-1950* is a simple, perfect bound affair printed on nondescript white paper stock. The most likely method used to print the book is offset lithography, a relatively efficient mode of printing in which an inked text is indirectly transferred (offset) to paper by way of a printing plate. This same method is acknowledged in the Jargon edition as “LITHO IN U.S.A” (see figure 2). Considering that there is no letterpress type and no “fine” material qualities used in the production of the original edition of *1450-1950*, Brown appears to be lampooning the colophons so typical of other Black Sun Press titles.

The racism of the colophon is harder to account for. Misjudged irony, perhaps, or a clumsy allusion to the bone char used in the manufacture of printers’ inks, or even a tasteless play on Brown’s own surname. However one might try to justify Brown’s statement it, nevertheless, reiterates some problematic attitudes toward race and color that a number of critics have noted in other areas of Brown’s work.¹⁶ For

¹⁵ Shef Rogers, “Imprints, Imprimaturs, and Copyright Pages,” in *Book Parts*, eds. Dennis Duncan and Adam Smyth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 51-64, 55.

¹⁶ In addition to North in *Camera Works* (74-82), see Craig Dworkin, “‘Seeing Words Machinewise’: Technology and Visual Prosody,” *Sagetrieb* 18, no. 1 (1999): 59-86.

example, in *The Readies* Brown describes words being “dropped into a specimen jar of alcohol.”¹⁷ The “most jolly ones,” he writes, “expand slightly and agitate the liquor like little ivory-toothed nigger boys diving for pennies” (4).

The destruction of the boy in Brown’s colophon might contrast with the preservation implied in *The Readies* but both images visualize what John K. Young considers the otherwise “unseen political implications for maintaining whiteness as the field on which reading occurs.”¹⁸ There is marked incongruity between the violence directed toward the boy of color, “DUELY” used and then “DESTROYED” in Brown’s colophon, and the pain the author experiences laboring over his manuscript. Where the white author, of his own volition, suffers for his art, the black body is, like a type specimen, made object for another’s purposes. Brown’s metaphors therefore reiterate how, as Michael Levenson notes, within the racialized discourses of modernism, “whites considered nonwhites to be raw material.”¹⁹

As these examples suggest, Brown uses racial difference and color to conceptualize the material conditions of his writing, with white and non-white bodies providing metaphors for the white/black, positive/negative binaries of print. In these binaries, Jonathan Senchyne writes, “whiteness as a central metaphor makes paper inextricable from the process by which blackness becomes difference and whiteness

¹⁷ Bob Brown, *The Readies*, ed. Craig Saper (1930, rpt. Baltimore, Maryland: Roving Eye Press, 2014), 4.

¹⁸ John K. Young, *Black Writers, White Publishers: Marketplace Politics in Twentieth-Century African American Literature* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 26.

¹⁹ Michael Levenson, *Modernism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 99.

the unmarked center.”²⁰ “What makes the text visible,” North similarly notes of the Black Sun Press colophon, “is race conceived in the most prejudiced and stereotypical way possible” (*Camera Works*, 81).

The racialized page and its typography in Brown’s colophon recalls Zora Neale Hurston in her essay “How It Feels to be Colored Me” published shortly before *1450-1950* in 1928: “I feel most colored when thrown against a sharp white background.”²¹ According to Brigitte Fielder and Jonathan Senchyne, Hurston acknowledges and then “refuses the invisibility of the racializing infrastructure (i.e., whiteness) that surrounds her and produces her intensified racial identification.”²² Similarly, Brown’s colophon indicates how the black-on-white dynamics of the page constitute a racialized infrastructure. If Brown seeks to ground the body of color into ink and make it “disappear into the abstractions of a universal sign system,” as North suggests, then the texts in *1450-1950* actually do the opposite (*Camera Works*, 81). Despite the efforts to destroy or (as “RUBBED” suggests) erase it, the body of color endures as the visualizing agent of type. Brown intimates as much in the marginalia of

²⁰ Jonathan Senchyne, “Bottles of Ink and Reams of Paper: *Clotel*, Racialization, and the Material Culture of Print,” in *Early African American Print Culture*, eds. Lara Langer Cohen and Jordan Alexander Stein (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 140-160, 145.

²¹ Zora Neale Hurston, *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*, ed. Cheryl A. Wall (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1995), 828.

²² Brigitte Fielder and Jonathan Senchyne, “Infrastructures of African American Print,” in *Against a Sharp White Background: Infrastructures of African American Print*, eds. Brigitte Fielder and Jonathan Senchyne (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2019), 3-28, at 6.

1450-1950 when he writes: “I AM NOT THE WHITE-WASHER / I’M THE BOY / WHAT ANSWERS THE BELL / WHEN YOU WANT THE COLOR / TURNED ON.” Far from concealing (white-washing) the faults of modernism’s race thinking, Brown inadvertently shows how intrinsic these prejudices are and how they are performed, and perpetuated, by the very medium of print: the “jazzy inky blood” of type, the “black riders” of the white page (*The Readies*, 2).²³

Vine Leaves and Fly-specks

Brown may inadvertently show how, “without prejudice there would almost literally be nothing to see, as if it were precisely the mote in the eye that gives it something to perceive,” as North suggests, but this depends on *how*, or, indeed, *if*, the reader sees the type before them (81). Habit dictates that the eye does not consciously perceive text but, rather, sees through it. For the purpose of communication and cognizance, text becomes transparent in the reading process. Brown subverts these conventions in 1450-1950 by means of his “FLY SPECK” which gives the eye something tangible to perceive. For the bibliophile, these small dark spots and accretions caused by insect excrement are problematic because they tarnish what should ideally be pristine and white. However, like scratches on a window, to adapt typographer Beatrice Warde’s analogy, these marks also draw attention to what is normally looked through: the transparent page. “The book typographer has the job of erecting a window between the reader inside the room,” Warde writes, “and that landscape which is the author’s

²³ “Black riders” is the title of Stephen Crane’s poetry collection *Black Riders and Other Lines* (1895), a formative book for Brown’s poetics.

words.”²⁴ Thus “the mental eye focuses *through* type and not *upon* it,” Warde reasons (16). Whereas for Warde, “any arbitrary warping of design or excess of ‘colour,’ [that] gets in the way of the mental picture to be conveyed, is a bad type,” for Brown such conspicuousness is welcome (16).

It seems perversely apposite that two of Brown’s “fly specks” should not only decorate his Black Sun Press colophon but also augment the claims it makes about the visibility of type. Brown models his “fly speck” after the printer’s typographical “flower” ornament, known variably as the “vine leaf,” “Aldine leaf,” “floral heart” or “hedera leaf.” Comprised of a solid heart-shaped leaf and stem, the ornamental vine leaf was used by Renaissance printers as an alternative to the hand-painted illumination and polychromatic decoration used in manuscripts. “As a glyph,” Hendrik D. L. Vervliet writes, “the leaf originates in imperial Greek and Roman inscriptions dated from the first or second century A.D., where it was used as a word divider, period, or line filler.”²⁵ According to Vervliet, medieval manuscripts continued to use the symbol in order “to mark the start of a new passage or paragraph” (14). Hand drawn by Brown, this printer’s symbol in *1450-1950* not only serves as a reminder of an older manuscript culture but it also symbolizes the typographical technologies that superseded it. With its suggestion of grapes, and the wine they make, the printer’s vine leaf tacitly recalls how Gutenberg took his ideas for the printing press from the

²⁴ Beatrice Warde, *The Crystal Goblet: Sixteen Essays on Typography*, ed. Henry Jacob (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1956), 15.

²⁵ Hendrik D. L. Vervliet, *Vine Leaf Ornaments In Renaissance Typography: A Survey* (New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press and HES & DE GRAAF Publishers, 2012), 14.

screw mechanism of the wine press.²⁶ The applied pressure of the screw allowed for an efficient method of pressing type that minimized smudging, thereby ensuring a clearly defined demarcation between the white page and the black type.

Brown's vine leaf ornaments might therefore be conceived as indexes of the Western print culture that *1450-1950* both critiques and celebrates. Hand drawn rather than printed, Brown's glyphs possess a singularity that moveable type lacks. Unlike the exact repeatability—the “*ditto device*” of the printer's symbol—Brown's drawings are always unique, always different (McLuhan, *The Medium*, 50). Yet, for a writer intent to liberate writing from movable type, Brown's representations of race (and also gender) in *1450-1950* are more concerned with general types than particulars. To recall its original use as a printing term, Brown's racial *stereotyping* along with his representations and objectifying of gender and sexuality in *1450-1950*, is a corollary of the homogenizing nature of print itself, particularly the “character of exact repeatability that,” according to the communications and media theorist Marshall McLuhan “is inherent in typography.”²⁷ With the advent of moveable type, McLuhan

²⁶ Andrew Ede, *Technology and Society: A World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 117.

²⁷ Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (1962, rpt. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 78. “A stereotype plate,” Senchyne explains, “is created from a mold of movable type, producing a lightweight replica in a single piece of metal, while thousands of pieces of movable type are redistributable for new uses, the stereotype can be printed over and over again, unchanged” (“Bottles of Ink and Reams of Paper,” 143).

argues, a “private fixed point of view became possible” allowing literacy to confer “the power of detachment, non-involvement.”²⁸

McLuhan foregrounds these ideas in *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (1962) which, taking the “fragmentation of the human psyche by print culture” as its subject, adumbrates Brown’s similar concerns regarding the obsolescence of the codex and print in the modern electronic age (*The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 32). In what Neil Compton describes as a necessary, yet “maddening and undisciplined contribution to the study of the role of printing in Western culture,” McLuhan argues that the superseding of oral literacy by a phonic one resulted in a move “from the muddled, communal, and involving culture of the ear toward the sharply defined, isolate individualism of the eye.”²⁹ This transition, McLuhan claims, was exacerbated by the “great medieval invention of typography”—a “technology of exact repeatability”—which “was the ‘take-off’ moment into the new spaces of the modern world” (*The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 79). To make these claims with the very typographical technology he critiques, McLuhan adopts “a material or conceptual form based on fragments.”³⁰ Thus, when, in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, McLuhan suggests “Rabelais is a scholastic in his mosaic procedures, consciously juxtaposing this ancient farrago [the multiple viewpoints of the manuscript] with the new individual, single-point-of-view- technology of print,” he could as well be describing

²⁸ Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (1967, rpt. London: Penguin Books, 2008), 50.

²⁹ Neil Compton, “The Paradox of Marshall McLuhan,” in *McLuhan: Pro & Con*, ed. Raymond Rosenthal (Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1969), 106-124, 117, 115-116.

³⁰ Ellen Lamberti, *Marshall McLuhan’s Mosaic: Probing the Literary Origins of Media Studies* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 42.

his own book's procedures (149). Such a "mosaic" procedure, as Elena Lamberti notes, "creates a pattern in which the assembled components reveal an image which is larger than its parts" (20). Consequently, Glenn Willmott writes, McLuhan's "texts tend to be non-linear or ideogrammic (in effect, jumpy, elliptical, repetitive, and full of wordplay with multiples meanings)."³¹ Even more so than Rabelais, it is the disjunctive and collagist modernist modes of Pound and Joyce that McLuhan's "mosaic" recalls. While these modernist qualities are, no doubt, why Compton considers *The Gutenberg Galaxy* "maddening and undisciplined," they are also what makes McLuhan's book resonate so purposefully with *1450-1950*.

While Brown offers his own critique of "the cool visual detachment" of print, *1450-1950* unwittingly reveals how entrenched the typographical perspective is in the sensibilities of those who might seek alternatives to it (McLuhan, *Gutenberg Galaxy*, 28). As much the singular imperfections of Brown's hand-drawn, handwritten texts in *1450-1950* resist what McLuhan considers the uniformity and "exact repeatability" of typography, they still perpetuate the white/black binary of the printed page and its "unwavering outlook [and] almost hypnotized visual stance" (*The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 28). In *1450-1950* the fixed "single-point-of-view" of movable type compounds the "attitudes of distance, detachment, and fascination toward racial difference" that characterizes the white, modernist, race-thinking of the time (Levenson, *Modernism*, 99-100). The books that Brown wrote under the auspices of the expatriate avant-garde scene in the late 1920s and early 1930s, including *1450-1950*, are, as Saper suggests, "symptomatic of a failure and a contradiction in the modernist project of the time,

³¹ Glenn Willmott, *McLuhan, Or, Modernism in Reverse* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 29.

which sought to move beyond prejudice through the visual.”³² The racialized and gendered ways in which Brown contends with Gutenberg’s typographical legacy in *1450-1950* makes his book, a compelling example of how, as McLuhan writes, “A point of view can be a dangerous luxury when substituted for insight and understanding” (*The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 216).

Pulling Out the Stopper

Brown dedicates *1450-1950* to “ALL MONKS WHO ILLUMINATED MANUSCRIPTS,” “EARLY ORIENTAL ARTISTS,” pioneering printers such as William Caxton, and a range of writers ranging from Boccaccio and Rabelais, William Blake and Laurence Sterne, to Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, and Brown himself. Francisco Goya and the carnivalesque clowns of Ruggero Leoncavallo’s opera *Pagliacci*, are also thrown into this idiosyncratic “mélange” of names.³³ Together, these names form a constellation of writers, artists, and publishers who have, in various ways (often humorously), contended with, or significantly extended, the visual propensities of language through their regard for the printed page, the material conditions of the book, and what the Russian Futurists called “the word as such.”³⁴

³² Craig Saper, “Notes on the Text,” in Bob Brown, *The Readies*, ed. Craig Saper (1930, rpt. Baltimore, MD: Roving Eye Press, 2015), xxxiii-xxxvi, xxxvi.

³³ Augusto de Campos, *A Margem da Margem* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1989), 129.

³⁴ “The Word as Such” is the English translation of the title of the poets’ Velimir Khlebnikov’s and Aleksei Kruchenykh’s futurist booklet, *Slovo kak takove* (1913). “To emphasize the Word as Such is,” Marjorie Perloff writes, “inevitably, to pay

(Fig 2)

Widely credited for having invented the first moveable type printing press in the mid-fifteenth century, it is perhaps inevitable that Gutenberg (Johannes Gensfleisch zur Laden zum Gutenberg) is also included in Brown's list of dedicatees. Indeed, the date "1450" acknowledges this epochal moment in the history of the book which is also the year that Gutenberg is believed to have commenced publishing the 42-line Bible. At the other end of the spectrum, "1950" speculates on the future reading technologies—what McLuhan dubs the "electric age"—that might surpass the Gutenberg era and the mechanical age of print.

"What," McLuhan asks in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, "will be the new configurations of mechanisms and of literacy as these older [typographical] forms of perception and judgment are interpenetrated by the new electric age" (279)? Brown, who was already asking similar questions in 1929, finds a possible answer to the problem of the ossified codex in the relatively new medium of film. In 1927, two years prior to the publication of *1450-1950*, Warner Bros had released the first feature film with synchronized sound, *The Jazz Singer*. The significance of this was not lost on Brown. "The written word hasn't kept up with the age," he writes in *The Readies*: "The movies have outmanouvered [sic] it. We have the talkies, but as yet no Readies" (1). Compared to the sensory immersion offered by "the talkies," he believes, "the

special attention to sound patterning, to phonemic play, punning, rhythmic recurrence, rhyme." Marjorie Perloff, *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1985), 228.

reading half of Literature,” because of its printed medium, “lags behind, stays old-fashioned, frumpish, beskirted”:

Present days reading methods are as cumbersome as they were in the time of Caxton and Jimmy the Ink. Though we have advanced from Gutenberg’s movable type through the linotype and monotype to photo-composing we still consult the book in its original archaic form as the only oracular means we know for carrying the word mystically to the eye. (*The Readies*, 28)

Brown singles out the Renaissance of Printing and its “beautiful but dumb books as clumsy in their way as the Rozetti stone” as symptomatic of the codex’s “archaic form” (*The Readies*, 40). As Brown’s pun implies, fine press books such as the editions of Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s work published by William Morris’s Kelmscott Press and, in Chicago, by Way and Williams, are considered to be as antiquated and impenetrable as the Rosetta Stone.³⁵ In such “beautiful but dumb books” words are muted by their “fine” design and production and no longer *speak* to the modern reader. Fine printing might be the preserve of bookmaking—a way of upholding “the existing medievalism of the BOOK”—but those qualities are no longer suitable “for the age” (*The Readies*, 27). Counter to these ideals and standards, and counter to the

³⁵ In 1895 the press Way and Williams, co-founded by Brown’s friend and mentor Chauncey L. Williams, commissioned Morris to produce an edition of Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s *Hand and Soul*. It was, Saper writes, the first of the “beautifully printed small editions” that the press distributed. Williams also “taught Brown hand-press and duplex printing techniques,” and advised him on “how to run a publishing and printing business.” Saper, *The Amazing Adventures*, 59.

valorization of the codex, Brown wants to let writing out of books: “Writing has been bottled up in books since the start. It is time to pull out the stopper” (*The Readies*, 28).

Hands On Reading

Brown’s misgivings about the contemporary state of the book are not confined to the Renaissance of Printing. The conspicuous disavowal of typography in *1450-1950* is representative of *all* print. In this respect, McGann’s otherwise perceptive reading of *1450-1950* invites question. Brown might, as McGann suggests, seek “to overgo the recent advances of those who used fine-book production as a means to radical poetic innovation,” but the extent to which *1450-1950* “displays a conscious appropriation of the many textual and bibliographical innovations” of its modernist and avant-garde contemporaries is not so clear (88, 89). McGann cites “futurism, dada, simultaneism, zaum, vorticism, [and] cubism” as examples, but, with the exception of the holographic images and texts reproduced in Russian futurist-zaum publications such as Velimir Khlebnikov’s and Alexei Kruchenykh’s *Worldbackwards* (1912), all of these “innovations” are primarily typographical (89).

More than any of his avant-garde contemporaries, it is one of the dedicatees of *1450-1950*, Laurence Sterne, “the English Rabelais,” and his novel *The Life and Times of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*—“a veritable typographical museum,” according to Christopher Fanning—which speaks most meaningfully to Brown’s typographical concerns in *1450-1950*.³⁶ Sterne was closely involved in the design and

³⁶ Horace Walpole, “Letter to Sir David Dalrymple,” in Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, ed. Howard Anderson (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1980), 473-474, 474. Christopher Fanning, “Sterne and Print Culture,” *The Cambridge*

printing of his novel—which was published in nine small volumes between 1759 and 1765—and decided its format, paper, type, and layout.³⁷ As much as this interest suggests a confidence in the possibilities of print, it also expresses a degree of doubt about the medium. Throughout *Tristram Shandy*, Sterne disrupts the linearity of its narrative and what McLuhan calls the “abstract explicit visual technology” of print (*The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 19). Blank and marbled pages, for instance, interrupt narrative progression, while idiosyncratic punctuation marks and ellipses draw attention to the visual quality of the page, all the while subtly reasserting the audible qualities of words otherwise silenced by print.

The significance of such typographical experimentation for Brown, however, is its visual implications and the spur it gives the reader to *see* as well as read the page. This emphasis on the nonverbal qualities of text is reiterated in *Tristram Shandy* when Sterne’s eponymous character affirms that, “of all the senses, the eye [...] has the quickest commerce with the soul,—gives a smarter stroke, and leaves something more inexpressible on the fancy, than words can either convey—or sometimes get rid of” (253).

Companion to Laurence Sterne, ed. Thomas Keymer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 125-141, 127,

³⁷ Black Sun Press published an edition of Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* (1768) in the same year they published *1450-1950*. Printed in green and purple Naudin type and illustrated with etchings and line-drawn vignettes by Polia Chentof, the book contrasts markedly with the robust materiality of *Tristram Shandy*.

The visual “flourish” of a stick, depicted in Sterne’s text by a woodcut illustration of one looping line, might therefore be more expressive than “a thousand [...] subtle syllogisms” (*Tristram Shady*, 426).

(Fig 3)

Likewise, a cruciform symbol might just as effectively communicate the act of Dr Slop crossing himself as Tristram’s verbal account: “What could Dr. Slop do?—He cross’d himself † —Pugh” (75). A similar supplementary use of the visual sign occurs frequently in *1450-1950* when Brown draws a cross after the written word “god.”

(Fig 4)

The hand drawn spiral in “GOD†” also recalls Sterne and his method of “illustrating” the circumlocutory nature of his book’s narrative with irregular and crooked lines.

(Fig 5)

Brown’s spiral form achieves a comparable effect by contrasting the roundabout logic of its gyring lines with the linear progression of “NARROW / GOLDEN LADDERS.”

As it does for Sterne, visual periphrasis in *1450-1950* undermines the homogenizing sequential logic and literal lines of moveable type. Compared to the detached point of view of type, Brown’s spirals propose a more *involved* (enfolding,

enveloping, intertwining) approach to the page that recalls the tactility of the manuscript culture described by McLuhan. Indeed, according to Fanning, despite Sterne's innovative embrace of print, "there remains within *Tristram Shandy* something of a nostalgia for the manual production of manuscript culture" and an understanding that books are "physical things that require tactile handling" (133, 129).

Motion Pictures

Like Sterne, Brown consciously scrambles the boundaries between the oral and the written in *1450-1950*. In "I LIKE LOOKING," for example, before leaving his signature "FLY SPECK" on the "NEW" unwritten pages of the future, Brown announces: "I LIKE LOOKING BACK / AT THE / ILLUMINATED MSS. OF / 1450 / AND FORWARD / TO THE / MORE ILLUMINATING / MOVIE SCRIPTS OF / 1950". Bookending the typographical present with the preceding age of the manuscript (1450) and the future prospects of the electric age (1950), Brown anticipates McLuhan's claims in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* regarding the contrasting technologies that dominate the latter half of twentieth-century Western culture:

We are today as far into the electric age as the Elizabethans had advanced into the typographical and mechanical age. And we are experiencing the same confusions and indecisions which they felt when living simultaneously in two contrasted forms of society and experience. (1)

However, the present electronic age of telecommunication, McLuhan contends, “translates itself back into the oral and auditory modes because of the electronic pressure of simultaneity” (*The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 72).

The Janus-faced aspect of “I LIKE LOOK LOOKING,” suggests a similar “interplay of contrasted cultures,” which, according to McLuhan, are “dissolving and resolving at the same time” (*The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 1). Indeed, Brown’s pun on manuscript and movie script is illuminating with regard to his attitudes in *1450-1950* concerning the printed medium of the book and its future. This optimism in future reading and writing technologies—including the “Reading Machine” of *The Readies*—is informed by looking back to the older practices of illumination and scribal art. In contrast to the linear perspective of type, McGann notes, Brown “faces ‘forward’ but with many glances ‘back’ and sideways full of interest and respect,” keeping his eyes “open in all directions” (89).

Combining calligraphic script with polychromatic illustrations and designs, “the relative equality among the sense of sight, sound, touch, and movement in interplay in manuscript culture,” McLuhan believes, poses a different literacy to “the modalities of mechanical writing and the technology of movable type” (*The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 113, 114). A typical manuscript is “highly textural and tactile” and, like the ideogram, “involves all the senses at once” (McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 47, 34). “Manuscripts,” compared to movable type, “were either too slow and uneven a matter to provide either a fixed point of view or the habit of gliding steadily on single planes of thought and information” (*The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 28). This older, slower, more involved method of reading does not confer “the power of detachment [and] non-involvement” that the fixed point of view of print elicits (McLuhan, *The Medium*, 50). “In place of cool visual detachment the manuscript world puts empathy

and participation of all the senses” (McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 28). “The eye” therefore, “is used, not in perspective but tactually, as it were” (McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 37).

Brown evokes the participatory nature of manuscript culture in 1450-1950 by dedicating his book to several figures that pre-date Gutenberg. As well as the monks who illuminated manuscripts such as, presumably, the seventh-century *Lindisfarne Gospels* or the ninth-century *Book of Kells*, Brown acknowledges the calligraphic writings of the Persian mathematician, astronomer, and poet, Omar Khayyam (1048-1131), and the calligraphy practiced by the “EARLY ORIENTAL ARTISTS” stretching back to the activities of the Chinese politician Li Si (c. 280-208 BCE) who pioneered “small seal” calligraphy.³⁸

It might seem contradictory that film (evoked by Brown by way of “movie scripts”) should be more akin to the typography he critiques than to the manuscripts he celebrates. Yet, according to McLuhan, there are similarities in the way “the reading of print puts the reader in the role of the movie projector” (*The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 124). As a “consistent series of static shots or ‘fixed points of view’ in homogenous relationship,” the reader moves “the series of imprinted letters before him” like a projector blending individual frames into one continuous motion (*The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 127). Readers of print, McLuhan claims, are “taught how to use the eye on the page so as to avoid all verbalization and all incipient movements of the throat which accompany our cinematic chase from left to right, in order to create the mental sound movie which we call reading” (*The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 47).

³⁸ David Diringer, *The Book Before Printing: Ancient, Medieval, and Oriental* (New York: Dover Publications, 1986), 408.

Expressing a similar sentiment in *The Readies*, Brown seeks to “budge type into motion, force it to flow over the column, off the page, and out of the book where it has snoozed in apathetic contentment for half a thousand years” (35). However, with “written matter moving before the eyes,” the reader is not responsible for making words move (*The Readies*, 38). In the Jargon edition of *1450-1950*, Brown, in a minuscule block of two-point type, elaborates on his notion of “moving reading” when he describes himself as –

mother – father – to – a – new – scope – for – all – writers – to – come –
rhythmical – writers – to – the – eye – – eye – writers – – – writing – in – an –
endless – line – for – my – reading – machine – – – simple – foolproof –
machine – with – printed – type – like – typewriter – ribbon – running – on –
before – readers – eye – giving – reader – chance – of – his – life – to – see –
something – hear – something – feel – something – get – a – mental – bellyful
– of – writer – right – before – him – bringing – them – closer – together –
now – that – there – is – more – reading – and – writing – going – on –
moving – reading – and – more – moving – writing . – – –

Brown’s new future scope for writing returns to the equality and interplay of senses that McLuhan identifies in manuscript culture. Reading should be a matter of *seeing*, *hearing*, and *feeling*. The ideal medium for such reading is a dynamic, moving one because “MOTION,” as he emphasizes in *The Readies*, is “the one essential of the new reading principle” (38). Motion will liberate words from the homogenizing linearity of movable type and “recapture something of the healthy hieroglyphic” they

lost when print domineered the page.³⁹ Consequently—and as an alternative to the *discreet* visual character of typography—Brown wants to retrieve “the optical end of the written word” as the basis of “a modern, moving word spectacle” (*The Readies*, 1, 40). *1450-1950* is a notable first step in this attempt to reassert and restore the tangible and visible presence of the word.

Eyefuls of Words

A prime example of Brown’s optical poetics is “EYES.” Although he includes the poem in *1450-1950*, “EYES” predates the book by a good ten years. While dining with Marcel Duchamp, Brown drew the original version on a paper napkin after noticing the similarity between his own eyes and the oysters on his plate (Ford, 303). Duchamp liked the optical poem enough to include it in the second issue of *The Blind Man*, the little magazine he edited with Henri-Pierre Roché and Beatrice Wood, in 1917.

(Fig 6)

The version that Brown includes in *1450-1950* is noticeably different from the original. As well as being written exclusively in capitals and adding an exclamation and a title, Brown also changes the text’s lineation and makes the oyster-eyes more uniform. The increasing size of his “EYES” down the page creates a crude sense of perspective (and, perhaps, stop frame motion) not apparent in the original.

³⁹ Bob Brown, jacket note, *1450-1950* (New York: Jargon and Corinth Books, 1959), np.

(Fig 7)

Brown credits “EYES” with “transporting him through and beyond every art movement of the time and away from a career that had made him a virtual writing machine” (Ford, 303). “I haven’t tired of my eyes-on-the-half-shell calligram,” Brown writes in his essay “Optical Balloon Juice”: “From such things my eyes squeeze juicy essences that run like bloody gravy o’er the roast beef of art” (1). “The kinetic and retinal effect” produced by the poem, Hugh Ford suggests “were its main source of pleasure” for Brown: “Looking at it, merely sitting and looking, taking it all in without moving an eye” was what made it, in Brown’s own “oystery eyes,” more satisfying than rhymed poetry” (303).

Brown’s choice of the word “calligram” to describe “EYES” is revealing of his regard for Apollinaire’s visual poems. Brown recalls his own habit of taking in all of “EYES” when, in *The Readies*, he claims: “I bathe in Apollinaire” (1). No doubt, as Saper suggests, Brown’s comment is a play upon the name of a popular French mineral water of the time, Apollinaris (*The Amazing Adventures*, 152). However, as McGann proposes, this wordplay also reflects Brown’s “ideal linguistic experience” and his desire “to immerse the reader in the print medium, much as the viewer is immersed in images at the cinema” (88, 85). Like McLuhan’s pre-Gutenberg reader, the reader of “EYES” does not read the text as they do the printed page, “segment by segment” (*The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 37). Rather, by apprehending it as a *gestalt*, the reader, is, as McLuhan would say, “wholly *with* the object”: “They go empathically into it. The eye is used, not in perspective, but tactually, as it were” (*The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 37).

How one reads and how one sees are very much Brown's concerns in 1450-1950. "Visual poetry," the obvious appellation for Brown's combination of word and image is, according to Saper, "too staid and decorous" (*The Amazing Adventures*, 153). Saper suggests "scratch & scrawl" instead, which not only "depends on the absolutely particular trace, passions and imperfection of [Brown's] handwriting," but also resists categorization "as one would a single medium like painting or film" (153). As much as they suggest *pensée*, poem, epigram, hieroglyph or ideogram, the texts comprising 1450-1950 never settle into a uniform style or mode. What they do all share, however, is a desire to give the reader what Brown calls "an eyeful" of "eyelingo" (*The Readies*, 1, 35). "I like to combine the sound and sight of letters with primitive drawings," Brown writes in "Optical Balloon Juice": "I'm not really interested in writing either prose or poetry. All I want is words. Words with the punch of hieroglyphics, words with the sweep and color of painters' lines."⁴⁰ In short: "Words with optical interest wherever possible" (1). Again like Sterne, the "optical end" of Brown's words also accommodates a measure of the "synesthesia and audile-tactile richness" that McLuhan associates with the manuscript (*The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 47).

Brown achieves a similar "richness" in "HIRSUTE OR WOMAN'S CROWNING GLORY," an optical text that speaks to the eye and ear of the reader. A playful yet erotically charged meditation on the titillating nature of women's hair (and, perhaps, fashion) "HIRSUTE" extends the colloquial pun (the idea of hair as one's crowning glory) by way of homophony. In the word "hirsute," one can hear *her suit*, a play on words which is also echoed in the reference to the subject's fur coat: "FIND ME IN MY FURRY COAT." At the same time, one *sees* "hirsute," with the

⁴⁰ Bob Brown, "Optical Balloon Juice," *Contempo* 2, no. 6 (1932): 1 and 4, 1.

long tresses of hair entangled in Brown's written text accentuating the verbal play of the poem and its themes of concealment and disclosure. Thus, the speaker's final invitation, or challenge, "COME FIND ME / HIDDEN ALLURINGLY / IN HAIR," is a sentiment that Brown's poem, with its words hidden among the strands of this human filament, reiterates.

(Fig 8)

The visual resemblance between Brown's vertical tresses of hair and the slanted lines of descending type in Apollinaire's calligram "Il Pleut," is reaffirmed by a smaller text situated immediately below "HIRSUTE." Throughout 1450-1950 smaller marginal poems or apostils are situated in close proximity to the book's main texts. Brown often calls this marginalia "vignettes," perhaps as a further allusion to the trope of the printing/wine press and the vine-leaf device. Like the marginalia and *scholia* of illuminated manuscripts, these additions often gloss the larger texts they accompany.

In the case of "APOLLINAIRE," the adjacent marginalia prompts the reader to make connections between the cascade of hair in "HIRSUTE" and the iconic typographical raindrops of "Il Pleut." Brown makes a visual allusion to the latter by means of a series of dashed lines that run horizontally under the name "APOLLINAIRE" before descending down the column of words: "IN / THE / HAIR." Thus, if Apollinaire's original calligram evokes the slanted trickles of raindrops on a windowpane, Brown's equivalent suggests a cascade, behind which the phrase "IL PLEUT" ("it is raining") is repeated in four vertical columns.

Adjacent to Brown's "APOLLINAIRE" is another of verbal-visual vignette, "EYES – LASHES." Concerned with eyes and hair, Brown's poem distills the crying or weeping ("pleurent") in Apollinaire's calligram by using pen strokes (similar to the dashes in "APOLLINAIRE") to depict eyelashes.⁴¹ Consequently, raindrops become teardrops; a point that Brown emphasizes with the word "LASHES" which suggests both the fringes of hair situated around the eyelids and the "lashing" of relentless rainfall.

As another type of hair, the poem's suggestion of eyelashes also reiterates the theme of concealment in "HIRSUTE": "I PEEP THROUGH YOUR FENCE." Yet, where "HIRSUTE" is articulated from the perspective of the hidden "hirsute" woman ("SEEK ME THROUGH MY / PLUCKED EYE BROWS"), "EYES – LASHES" adopts the perspective of the seeker who furtively violates the woman's defenses. If to peep is to suggest surreptitious looking, it would seem that the poem's speaker sees but is not seen. Not only is there the suggestion of scopophilia—looking at another person as object as source of pleasure—but what Laura Mulvey considers its most perverse manifestation in "obsessive voyeurs and Peeping Toms, whose only sexual satisfaction can come from watching, in an active controlling sense, an objectified other."⁴² The otherwise innocuous word "peep" in Brown's concluding phrase therefore also imparts a more sinister act of voyeurism or prurience; a Peeping Tom's violation of a woman's privacy. Far from dissolving the fixed point of view of print, Brown's manuscript in this page of poems not only reaffirms it, but it does so by

⁴¹ Guillaume Apollinaire, *Selected Poems*, trans. Martin Sorrell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 142-143.

⁴² Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6–18, 9.

means of a detached, distanced gaze that fetishizes and ventriloquizes the woman as a passive subject.

Like the prurient voyeur-speaker in “EYES – LASHES,” Brown wants to give the reader of *1450-1950* an “eyeful” of objectified words. Brown is not alone. From Imagism’s “Direct treatment of the ‘thing’ whether subjective or objective,” to the “rested totality” of writing in Louis Zukofsky’s Objectivism, the objectification of words is a ubiquitous concern of modernist poetry.⁴³ In Brown’s case, however, his manner of objectifying words also suggests sexual objectification.

“Treating things as objects,” Martha C Nussbaum contends, “is not objectification” because “objectification entails making into a thing, treating as a thing, something that is really not a thing.”⁴⁴ Brown, however, frequently depicts words with human or creaturely qualities. “I have only to bend my finger in a beckon,” Brown writes in *The Readies*, “and words, birds of words, hop on it, chirping” (4). When, however, Brown claims that, “The right of the writer to have his will with words is obvious,” he genders them in relation to the perspective of a male heterosexual writer. “Words,” Brown notes, “have always been defenseless and never wholly virginal” (*The Readies*, 10). It is perhaps inevitable then that Brown should dedicate *The Readies* to “ALL EYE-WRITERS / AND / ALL READERS / WHO WANT AN EYEFUL” (np). In “Optical Balloon Juice” the male, heteronormative perspective of this optical literacy is accentuated when Brown conflates words with

⁴³ Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays*, ed. T. S. Eliot (1935, rpt. London: Faber and Faber, 1960), 3; Louis Zukofsky, *Prepositions +: The Collected Critical Essays*, ed. Mark Scroggins (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 13.

⁴⁴ Martha C. Nussbaum, “Objectification,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 24, no. 4 (1995), 249-291, at 257.

women and the culinary pleasures of the gourmand: “I’m really interested only in words, and chiefly the looks of them, I like ‘em young, old, rare, blond, well-done, pregnant and brunette” (1). Whether “rare” or “well-done,” words, like women, are, to use the colloquial expression, treated like meat.

“In a world ordered by sexual imbalance,” Laura Mulvey reflects, “pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female” with “woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) male gaze” to act upon (17). Or, as John Berger summarizes: “*men act and women appear.*”⁴⁵ Brown might pronounce that men and women are “EQUAL / ALL OVER / ALL EVEN / BALANCED / EQUALLY, INTERNALLY, EXTERNALLY / ETERNALLY / MATED,” but his work invariably ascribes stereotypical qualities and roles to the sexes.

(Fig 9)

“MEN, I LIKE / | / STANDING UP / WOMEN, TOO / _____ / LYING DOWN,” Brown writes in one “Vignette.” The passive woman and the erect man take on more sinister implications in “MIDINETTE,” a French phrase that refers to young fashionable Parisian socialites: “SCREAMS IN THE NIGHT / [...] AND A GIRL’S SOFT GIVING / [...] / YELLS IN THE EAR / AND THE LOSS OF HEARING.” Whether those “YELLS” are from force or pleasure is not clear, but the “LOSS OF HEARING” that results recalls how, for Brown and his scopophilia of the word, “Literature is essentially Optical – – – not Vocal” (*The Readies*, 33). Words should be seen but not, necessarily, heard. Insisting that writing should “become more optical, more eye-teasing, eye-tasty,” Brown subjects his words to what Mulvey calls a

⁴⁵ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 47.

“controlling and curious gaze” (8). Women *and* words, to recall Berger, are made to appear, but silently so. The controlling, scopophilic gaze of Brown’s poetics mutes their agency.

Rabble

As the colophon in the original edition of *1450-1950* concurs, the controlling gaze of Brown’s poetics also determines the representations of race and color in his writing. In making them, like his words, more optical, more “eye-tasty,” both the female body and the body of color are also made passive and silent. Where this silence is heard most profoundly in *1450-1950* is in Brown’s most irreverent, satirical, bawdy, or impish moments. Assuaging the charges of racism, homophobia, and misogyny that have been leveled at him, Paul Stephens notes the “degree of satire and parody” that motivates Brown’s writing.⁴⁶ By this token, one might assume that Brown’s use of the word “nigger” parodies the language and rhetoric used in the texts that he, as an editor “without prejudice,” included in his *Readies* anthology, such as Samuel Putnam’s “Dirty Nigger.”⁴⁷ Or, perhaps, Brown’s pejorative language wryly alludes to the kind of the contentious racial stereotyping that characterized his friend Vachel Lindsay’s poetry.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Paul Stephens, “Bob Brown, ‘Inforg’: The ‘Readies’ at the Limits of Modernist Cosmopolitanism,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 35, no. 1 (2011): 143-164, 162, n.4.

⁴⁷ Karen Leick, *Gertrude Stein and the Making of an American Celebrity* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2009), 112.

⁴⁸ It would seem that in later life Brown was aware of how inappropriate his earlier language was. In a letter to Williams, Brown includes an early poem “DEDICATION / AUX MES FRERES”—from his collection *My Marjonary* (1916)—which invokes

It is, however, also in his satire and parody where Brown's bigotry and chauvinism is most unequivocal. In "MISSIONARIES," for example, Brown appears to parody what Rachel Blau DuPlessis describes as the invariable "attribution," by mainly white male modernist writers, "of cannibalism to others [as] a claim of moral superiority and greater civilization."⁴⁹

the music of "rag-time / As it's thumped out / In a nigger joint." Next to the offending line, Brown writes: "Excuse it! Mike Gold taught me better than to use it again in 40 years." Brown here implies that his language was not, at the time, used for ironic or satirical purposes but part of an unquestioned vocabulary of period. For example, one of the writers that Brown held in great esteem at the time, Gertrude Stein, used the word two years previously in *Tender Buttons* (1914). However, by the time Brown's friend (and Stein's literary executor) Carl Van Vechten used the word in the title of his novel *Nigger Heaven* in 1930, the controversy it caused indicates a significant shift in attitude. It is perhaps apposite that it was the proletarian writer Michael Goldberg (author of the article "Gertrude Stein: A Literary Idiot") who advised Brown about using such problematic language. Bob Brown, letter to Jonathan Williams, c. April, 1958. Bob Brown Papers (Box 108, Collection 723). UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library.

⁴⁹ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, "'HOO, HOO, HOO': Some Episodes in the Construction of Modern Whiteness." *American Literature* 67, no. 4 (1995): 667-700, 686. Brown may in fact be alluding to his own earlier poem "My Love," from *My Marjony*, which, according to Saper, "celebrate[s] happy cannibals eating a white man's bones." As well as exemplifying Brown's "fascination with exoticism and his identification with the Other," this poem, Saper believes, is expressive of Brown's "condemnation of white imperialism" (*The Amazing Adventures*, 102).

(Fig 10)

Brown's text concludes with an indifferent "WHY NOT?" to its speculations about missionaries "BEING BOILED IN / BLACK POTS / BY BLACK MEN"; an image not unlike the "nice little, white little, missionary stew" in T. S. Eliot's "Sweeney Antagonistes."⁵⁰ Brown, however, does not question the stereotype that provokes this thought. Instead of debunking it, Brown reiterates the stereotype by way of a caricature that depicts a culturally non-specific, pot-bellied, scalp-locked "savage" pulling the remnants of another human form from a pot.

While such satirical aspects of Brown's writing do not exonerate his stereotyping, they do recall how, particularly in *1450-1950*, Brown frequently traffics in an impish and irreverent humor that reaches back to one of his touchstones, Rabelais, and a carnivalesque tradition that, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, finds its "greatest literary expression" in the humanist's pentalogy, *La vie de Gargantua et de Pantagruel* (c. 1532-1564).⁵¹ More specifically, it is Rabelais's concept of the grotesque body in *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, along with the bawdy "carnivalesque marketplace style of expression" that he uses to depict it, which speaks most pertinently to the humor of *1450-1950* and the wider implications of Brown's attitudes toward race and gender (12).

⁵⁰ T. S. Eliot, *The Poems of T. S. Eliot: Collected and Uncollected Poems*, Vol. 1 of 2, eds. Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue (London: Faber and Faber, 2015), 121.

⁵¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (1965, rpt. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), 4.

In his review of the Jargon edition of *1450-1950*, the poet A. R. Ammons intimates a carnivalesque tone in Brown's book when he describes it as "earthy and funny; and on a higher plane, entertaining; and on a higher plane, a serious criticism of life; and on the highest plane, earthy and funny."⁵² Such qualities can be compared to Rabelais's manner in *Gargantua and Pantagruel* of "mixing jokes with theology or medicine and Carnival topics with high seriousness."⁵³ More recently, Saper has implied similarly Rabelaisian qualities in *1450-1950*, describing Brown's "mix of visual and clowning elements" as "a type of slap-stick poetic burlesque" (*The Amazing Adventures*, 153).

Brown's "earthy," "slap-stick" humor is apparent in the poem "PINK CHEEKS" which, by way of Rabelais, lampoons certain literary sensibilities:

WOMEN, READING & WEEPING
LONG TEAR TRICKLES
DOWN PALE
MADONNA CHEEKS
ADOWN ARISTOCRATIC
BLUE NOSES
O RABELAIS
SLAP FOR ME
THEIR FLABBY FAT
PINK CHEEKS

⁵² A. R. Ammons, "Three Poets," *Poetry* 96, no. 1 (1960): 52-55, 52.

⁵³ Samuel Kinser, *Rabelais's Carnival: Text, Context, Metatext* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 31.

The weeping and trickles in “PINK CHEEKS” might recall the tears of “APOLLINAIRE,” however, in this instance Brown is more concerned with ridiculing the purple literature (and its readers) that traffics in such affected poeticisms as “ADOWN” than he is with acknowledging a kindred spirit. To this end, and invoking the bawdiness of Rabelais, Brown puns on facial cheeks and buttocks. In doing so, he conflates corporal punishment with erotic horseplay, suggesting that the poem’s weeping women might be corrected (brought to their senses) with a slap on either part of their anatomy.

Whereas the Rabelaisian slapstick of “PINK CHEEKS” tacitly reiterates the misogyny that occurs throughout 1450-1950, in *The Readies* Brown invokes Rabelais in the context of blackface minstrelsy, declaring: “I’ll be end man in any Rabelasian [sic] rhetorical rabble” (2). So named because of their position within the semicircle of blackface performers, “endmen” were the slave characters in minstrel shows that played tambourines or bone castanets. These same instruments also gave these characters their generic names: Tambo and Bones. The “end man” was intrinsic to what Eric Lott describes as minstrelsy’s “objectification of black characters in comic set pieces, repartee, physical burlesque.”⁵⁴ This objectification also sexualized the performers and made them the subject of a white, scopophilic gaze. “The primary purpose of early blackface performance was,” Lott suggests, “to display the ‘black’ male body, to fetishize it” within the context of bawdy comic spectacle:

⁵⁴ Eric Lott, “Love and Theft: The Racial Unconscious of Blackface Minstrelsy,” *Representations* 39 (1992): 23-50, 28

“Black” figures were able *to be looked at*, shaped to the demands of desire; they were screens on which audience fantasy could rest, securing white spectators’ position as superior, controlling, not to say owning, figures. (28)

To what extent, we might then ask, can the physical burlesque of the minstrel show—particularly its obsession with the “black” body—be compared to the concept of the carnivalesque that Bakhtin considers central to understanding Rabelais? Not unlike the disorderly, boisterous body of people suggested by Brown’s choice of the word “rabble,” the festival humor of medieval carnival, Bakhtin writes, “marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” (10). Speech, according to Bakhtin, became “frank and free” during carnival time, “permitting no distance between those who came in contact with each other and liberating from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times” (10). The laughter of the carnivalesque is therefore “the laughter of all the people” (11). It is also an ambivalent laughter: “gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives” (11-12). Crucially, this laughter is not above the object it mocks. “The people’s ambivalent laughter,” Bakhtin insists, “expresses the point of view of the whole world: he who is laughing also belongs to it” (12). The audience that laughs at minstrelsy, however, does so because it perceives itself as superior to it. This sense of superiority, according to Michael North, also extends to the performer: “The grotesque exaggeration of blackface makeup had always been meant at least in part to emphasize the fact that the wearer was *not* black.”⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-century Literature* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 7.

A tentative answer to the question of Brown's uneasy conflation of Rabelaisian carnival and blackface minstrelsy might therefore be extrapolated from the "grotesque realism" which Rabelais derives from the tradition of folk humor and employs in his exaggerated depictions of the human body (Bakhtin, 18). As part of the "triumphant, festive principle" of carnival, the grotesque body, Bakhtin claims, levels all notions of individual difference, demarcation, and hierarchy as the "comic, social, and bodily elements are given [...] as an indivisible whole" (19). The keynotes of this catholic body are, Bakhtin writes, fertility, growth, renewal, and "a brimming-over abundance" as they manifest in the exaggerated functions of "sexual life, eating, drinking and defecation" (321).

1450-1950 abounds with references to the body, its processes, and its function, but the most "grotesque" occurrence is in the book's concluding text, "I DON'T DIE!" As well as adumbrating a number of Rabelais's bodily thematics, this text also conveys the precarious position that the body of color assumes in Brown's poetics. "I DON'T DIE!" depicts a crudely drawn, stick-like "skeleton" figure whose main anatomical parts are labeled under the polarized categories of pensiveness and mirth: "MY WATCHING EYE" versus "MY WINKING EYE," "MY DUG-IN TOES" versus "MY PLAYFUL TOES."

(Fig 11)

Below the skeleton Brown writes, "MY SKELETON / BOTH / ARTICULATES AND GESTICULATES," and, in the Jargon edition, to acknowledge their republication, adds: "THESE POMES SHALL / RISE AGAIN." Brown's pun on the

skeleton's articulated joints and lucid linguistic expression, recalls another poem in *1450-1950* titled "SKELETONS" which conflates skeletons with scarecrows.

(Fig 12)

"JAPANESE SCARE-CROWS," Brown writes: "WITH ALL YOUR ARTICULATION / YOU CAN ONLY/ DANCE / FOR EXPRESSION." Dancing in Hebrew, Sanskrit, and "STATELY ETHIOPIAN" (Ge'ez), the scarecrows start to resemble their respective scripts. Lucid linguistic expression, Brown implies, is but one part of communication. Gestural, non-semantic modes of communication, such as dancing, are equally important for conveying meaning. These modes are also important for re-establishing the close links between language and body severed by print. The skeleton that "ARTICULATES AND GESTICULATES" in "I DON'T DIE!" similarly endorses visual-audile-tactile modes of expression and their importance for supplementing the connected, sequential, linear constraints of print's *articulated* semantics.

With his head "IN THE CLOUDS" and his feet straddling "BRAZIL" and "CHINA" (two of the countries where Brown lived and worked) Brown's skeleton assumes the giant stature of a Gargantua or Pantagruel. Pantagruel is also implicated in the author's "THIRSTY THROAT" which recalls how the name of Rabelais's character, according to Bakhtin, derives from "a colloquial term for a hoarseness caused by excessive drinking" (325). "*Panta* in *Greek*," Rabelais writes, "is as much to say as *all*, and *Gruel* in the *Hagarene* language doth signify *thirsty*."⁵⁶

⁵⁶ François Rabelais, *Gargantua and Patagruel*, trans. Sir Thomas Urquhart and Perre Le Motteux (1900, rpt. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2016), 176.

The trope of thirstiness adumbrates the wine-printing analogies that 1450-1950 shares with Rabelais's novel. "It seemed," McLuhan writes, "quite natural to Rabelais to hymn the printed book, the product of the new wine press": "That wisdom and knowledge should be distilled from the press, seemed an obvious metaphor to anybody in the sixteenth century" (*The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 153). Acknowledging how, for example, "*a swarm of our Modern Poets and Orators [...] have rais'd our Vulgar Tongue and made it a noble and everlasting Structure*," Rabelais describes their writings as "*Divine nectar, rich, racy, sparkling, delicate, and luscious Wine*" (686). For McLuhan, Rabelais's wine metaphor is especially evident in the Bacchic-like mysteries of the Oracle of the Divine Bottle recounted in the disputed fifth book of *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*. There we find Bacbuc (from the Hebrew word for "bottle"), "the Bottle's Lady of Honour, and Priestess of all the Mysteries" who makes Pantagruel's companion, Panurge, "sing an *Epileny*" (780, 799).

(Fig 13)

"The Philosophers, Preachers, and Doctors of your World feed you with fine Words and Cant at the Ears," Bacbuc tells Panurge, but "we really incorporate our Precepts at the Mouth":

Therefore I'll not say to you, Read this Chapter, see this Gloss; No, I say to you, Taste me this fine Chapter, swallow me this rare Gloss. Formerly, an Ancient Prophet of the *Jewish* Nation eat a Book, and became a Clerk even to the very Teeth; now I will have you drink one, that you may be Clerk to your very Liver. Here, open your Mandibules. (*Gargantua*, 800)

Like Brown in *The Readies* pulling out the stopper on words bottled up by print, Rabelais, as Lothar Müller writes, “lets the language of reading, knowledge, and scholarship slip into enthusiastic poetic inebriation” caused by liberally quaffing “the wine of the grotesque and of folk culture.”⁵⁷

When Panurge drinks the enlightening wine of the Bottle, “gaping as his wide as his Jaws would stretch,” he repeats a key trope in Rabelais’s grotesque body: the gaping mouth (800). The open mouth, Bakhtin maintains, is “related to the lower stratum; it is the open gate leading downward into the bodily underworld” where death and destruction precipitate renewal and fertility (325). Instead of renouncing “the material and bodily roots of the world,” the body, Bakhtin writes, reconnects with these earthy roots and is regenerated by them (19). The “poles of transformation, the old and the new, the dying and the procreating, the beginning and the end of the metamorphosis,” according to Bakhtin, become markedly ambivalent in these processes that “recast [the body] into a new mold” (26).

Brown, however, is as concerned with recasting books (and, of course, their type) as he is the body; and both are renewed through consumption and ingestion. This is especially apparent in the way that book and body are intrinsically related in “I DON’T DIE!” by means of Brown’s vine leaf ornament. Brown reproduces the device in miniature to symbolize his heart. At the same time, the vine-leaf also symbolizes the author’s bookish “ART” which, like wine, might also be conceived as another “sirrrup of the Vine-leaf” (*Gargantua*, 120).

⁵⁷ Lothar Müller, *White Magic: The Age of Paper*, trans. Jessica Spengler (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 56.

Brown also evokes the vineyard in *The Readies* when he confesses that, when “it comes to words my heart is very tendrily” (9). For such a seasoned writer, wordsmith, and bibliopole as Brown, this tender, clinging affection is not hyperbole but reflects the prodigious life he had experienced as a writer and publisher “in every imaginable form, genre, and medium” (Saper, *The Amazing Adventures*, 3).⁵⁸ Brown was also a seasoned bookseller. “Since I was sixteen,” he writes, “I had bought and sold rare books and handled with growing interest every kind of published material from papyrus through incunabula to the most recent products of private presses.”⁵⁹ As a writer so involved with books it seems apposite that in “I DON’T DIE!” Brown should, as Paul Stephens suggests, “portray himself as both a writer and as a living embodiment of the history and afterhistory of books” (147).

⁵⁸ “I wrote a thousand stories in a couple of years,” Brown tells Whit Burnett in the Paris edition of *The New York Herald*: “When I was twenty I went to London and wrote feuilletons for Munsey. I edited ‘Pearsons.’ I was the editor of the first book of free verse which Mencken said got the spirit of that movement. I wrote myself out. So I went to South America and last September I sold my three papers down there and now I’m going to write.” Whit Burnett, “Bob Brown, Who Used to Write ‘Diamond Dick’ Stories, Debases His Art after Japan Trip,” *The New York Herald*, Paris edition (Saturday, April 27, 1929), Press clipping. Bob Brown Papers, (Box 108, Collection 723). UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library.

⁵⁹ Bob Brown, *Readies for Bob Brown’s Machine: A Critical Facsimile Edition*, eds. Craig Saper and Eric M. White (1931, rpt. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 160.

Brown portrays this intimate history by means of the “BOOKS” he inscribes near to what Rabelais calls “*the Wine-pot*”: the skull (*Gargantua*, 327). Recalling the bodily functions in Rabelais’s grotesque realism, the creative process intimated in “I DON’T DIE!” is very much a peptic one that emphasizes swallowing, ingestion, and excretion. Indeed, in another of the apostils included in *1450-1950*, “OFF SET,” Brown recalls how the bibliophilic “bookworm” shares their name with the wood-boring insects that feed on books. He concludes by reminding these “WORMS” that “BOOKS / AFTER BEING EATEN // MUST BE DIGESTED.” It is a verity that Brown’s skeleton in “I DON’T DIE!” enacts. Thus, the skeleton’s “BOOKS” are consumed as sensorial fodder before travelling down its “THIRSTY THROAT,” passed its heart (“ART”), and through its “STOMACH FOR EVERYTHING,” to finally be defecated (or otherwise ejected) out of its “PAINFULLY PLEASANT PLACE” as the fertilizing agent of a future literary technology: “MY READING MACHINE.” “The picture” therefore, as Stephens proposes, “seems to suggest that you are not only what you eat [or, indeed, drink] — but also what you read and see” (147).

If the grotesque body in “I DON’T DIE!” turns books into sustenance, and sustenance into books, one might consider the significance of the cannibalistic consumption that occurs in “MISSIONARIES.” Cannibalism, it seems, “buries and revives,” “degrades and materializes” in similar ways to Rabelais’s grotesque body (Bakhtin, 12, 20). When Brown writes “THESE POMES SHALL / RISE AGAIN,” he expresses a similar confidence in the regenerative possibilities of the grotesque body that are also implicit in the equally peptic context of cannibalism. As DuPlessis suggests, “if others (imaginarily) eat us, our substance will merge with theirs; we will be forced to share our identities with them” (687). White jokes and fantasies about

cannibalism, Aldon Lynn Nielsen claims, therefore betray an implicit “fear of being swallowed up by blackness.”⁶⁰ This fear is as gendered as it is racialized, DuPlessis proposes, because if “other cultures are represented as ‘eating’ us, we,” as white Westerners, “help them (their men particularly) regenerate and become strong, a notion which violates our sense of the correctness of Western world political hegemony and its gender narratives” (686).

The fantasies and fears of being “swallowed up by blackness” noted by Nielsen and DuPlessis means the degradation and debasement which Bakhtin considers fundamental to Rabelais’s grotesque realism take on literal meanings for Brown. Not only does Brown’s skeleton articulate via the tacit suggestion of the character’s name, “Bones,” a further expression of his Rabelaisian “end man” but that racial stereotype is debased by the white audience that laughs *at*, not *with*, such characters. Likewise, the “NEGRO BOY” in Brown’s colophon is not only destroyed but also degraded (literally so) in order that the author’s “ART” might materialize on the page. Far from leveling “hierarchical rank” as the ambivalent laughter of carnival does, the laughter of Brown’s “Rabelaisian rhetorical rabble” reasserts the privileged position of its white author (Bakhtin, 10).

Reduced to a skeleton, the author in “I DON’T DIE!” is divested of a superficial marker of racial difference: skin; the “‘content’ or ‘presence’ that,” Senchyne writes, “nonwhites carry on the surface of their bodies” (“Bottles of Ink,” 156). Sloughing the identifying marks of skin and physiognomy in the image of one universal human type, Brown’s skeleton seems to reiterate what North considers the

⁶⁰ Aldon Lynn Nielsen, “In the Place of an Introduction: Eating Jim Crow,” in *Reading Race in American Poetry: An Area of Act*, ed. Aldon Lynn Nielsen (Urbana and Chicago IL: University of Illinois Press, 200), 1-24, 14.

“utopian transparency” of modernism and its desire to “transform particulars into pure form” (*Camera Works*, 79, 81). If there are “NO FLIES” on the author’s skeleton—a phrase that suggests both the colloquial usage for being quick witted, and an entomological agent of decomposition—neither can there be “FLY SPECKS” to blemish it. With nothing to distract the eye, there is nothing to perceive.

Brown’s skeleton therefore presents another “sharp white background”—or what Senchyne calls “the ‘background’ of whiteness that claims for itself the privilege of invisibility or absence”—against which color is perceived (“Bottles of Ink,” 156). As the framework for something that once was, the skeleton is a fitting analogy for such absence and invisibility. Like a blank page, the author’s bony structure embodies—or, perhaps, exposes—what Senchyne calls “the social structure of whiteness” itself; the determining “absence” which makes “race appear ‘present’ on the body of its others,” just as ink appears present on the blank page (“Bottles of Ink,” 151).

Drawing a Blank

To conclude by reflecting on the wider significance of *1450-1950* and its problematic assessment of “the Gutenberg Galaxy” it is, in the spirit of Brown’s book, worth “LOOKING BACK” again at Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* “AND FORWARD TO” the concrete poetry that Brown subsequently became associated with.⁶¹ Between these

⁶¹ As one of “the vanguard poets in the first half of the twentieth century” Brown’s work, Saper suggests, is “a useful starting point” for identifying key precursors “to the American variant of the Concrete poetry movement of the 1960s and 70s.” Craig Saper, “Concrete Poetry in America,” *Coldfront* (2015): <http://coldfrontmag.com/concrete-poetry-in-america/>.

poles it is possible to see not only the full implications of Brown's problematic conceptions of race and gender, but also how these prejudices might be remediated as instructive measures for assessing the "medial history" of literature, as Pressman calls it, and the blind spots that compromise conventional reading habits.

Writing about Sterne's famous *black* page in *Tristram Shandy* in *The Readies*, Brown makes it apparent how the social structures of whiteness "colored" his perception of the page:

From long gazing on the restful blank [sic] page for Poor Yorick in Tristram Shandy [sic] I began to get the idea. I learned to write m a r g i n a l i a without any text; I found myself flapping along quite happily without any words at all. (2).

Not unlike the way in which Brown "takes in" his optical poem "EYES," and like "Poor Yorick" in his grave, the eye that gazes on Sterne's page, unburdened of language, finally rests in peace. Yet, whether typo or inaccuracy, Sterne's black page (*pages*, in fact, as Sterne replicates the woodcut print on the page's recto and verso) is anything but "blank." As an adjective that describes white paper free from written or printed characters, "blank" is the very antithesis of Yorick's memorial. What is normally defined, if not intensified, against the white field of the page now, in Sterne's novel, dominates it. To invert the grotesque trope of the "the gaping mouth," the page itself has been "swallowed up by blackness."

(Fig 14)

From the perspective of Mulvey's theories about the male gaze, Brown's description of "gazing" on Sterne's page is telling. The "determining male gaze" witnessed in "HIRSUTE" and its related marginalia, which surreptitiously "projects its fantasy on the female figure," is now confronted by an opacity that refuses the black/white legibility of print (Mulvey, 11). One cannot furtively peep through the black page. Neither can the reader project their fantasies, or fears, onto it. In this respect it is the antithesis of the blank page in *Tristram Shandy*, upon which the reader is invited to concupiscently "paint," according to his or her "own mind" and "fancy," the comely figure of Widow Wadman (330).

Whereas the blank page is about potential and possibility, the black page, Roger Moss suggests, is "a page lost forever to the indomitable ink."⁶² What is lost, Moss implies, are the possibilities of definition that the white page determines. Without contrast and difference, meaning cannot be perceived. Thus, for Moss, the "indomitable" black presence of the page is an instance of "noncommunication where the page is filled up rather than emptied, drowned by noise rather than left silent" (191). Fullness becomes the privation of the page's invisible power, displacing what Senchyne calls "the unmarked center" of the white page to the margins. No longer signifying on the terms determined by the white page, Yorick's memorial page is, like a printer's smudge, the gesture of its own unique, autonomous presence. Indeed, like Warde's "ugly typography [which] never effaces itself," the black page is tenaciously and impudently a "pure particularity" to be contended with rather than seen through (*The Crystal Goblet*, 17). Instead of the "loss" suggested by Moss, Sterne's page intimates an excess of meaning that communicates beyond print's binaries.

⁶² Roger B. Moss, "Sterne's Punctuation," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 15, no. 2 (1981-1982): 179-200, 192.

The excess of Sterne's black pages in *Tristram Shandy* is reiterated in a series of concrete poems that the Austrian poet and designer Heinz Gappmayr made in the mid 1960s concerned with opacity and legibility. One, included in the *Chicago Review*'s 1967 "Anthology of Concretism," consists of a roughly hewn black square of ink, not unlike Yorick's memorial page.⁶³ Around the edges of the impervious square are the almost imperceptible protrusions of what appear to be parts of single letters, words, or perhaps, ink smudges. It is—quite literally so—not clear whether these handwritten forms are generated or occluded by the imposing block of black ink. Thus, Gappmayr leaves his reader with an uncertainty about the print medium which simultaneously facilitates and impedes meaning. What is certain, as Jamie Hilder notes of a similar poem by Gappmayr called "Zeichen" (sign) from 1965, is that, like Sterne's black pages, the poem "refuses to be complicit in [the] desire for print language as a transparent mode of communication."⁶⁴ Like Sterne's black pages, Gappmayr's text challenges the simple binary of translucency and opaqueness by which print conventionally operates. "How are we supposed to *read* this poem?" Hilder asks: "Perhaps it is not the poem that needs reading but the act of reading itself. What do we expect of ink on pages? What do our habits of looking and comprehending prevent us from, seeing, and what do they allow?" (4).

1450-1950 asks similar questions, but to respond to them sufficiently requires approaching Brown's book in the Rabelaisian spirit of "Pantagruelism": "a mode of

⁶³ Heinz Gappmayr, untitled, *Chicago Review* 19, no. 4 (1967), 35. The poem is also reproduced on UbuWeb: <http://www.ubu.com/historical/gappmayr/gappmayr4.html>.

⁶⁴ Jamie Hilder, *Designed Words for a Designed World: The International Concrete Poetry Movement, 1955-1971* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016), 110.

reading and drinking [and] a way of life,” Samuel Kinser explains, that necessitates a “positive empathetic desire to appreciate others’ intentions as more important than their actions” (209). Thus, to comprehend *1450-1950* requires, as Brown does, imbibing the heady vintage of print and getting “well whittled with the Juyce of the Grape” (*Gargantua*, 419). In the vintner’s sense of the word, the *troubled* text of *1450-1950*—Brown’s provocative stirrings of the printer’s inky lee by way of his racial and gender stereotypes—certainly agitates the sensibilities of the contemporary reader. However, by reading *1450-1950* with the Pantagruelist’s “*Jollity of mind*,” and by trying to understand rather than dismiss Brown’s intentions, the reader will be alerted to what is otherwise hidden in plain sight (Rabelais, 516). This is not only the medial histories of print but also its latent ideologies and the reader’s unwitting complicity in sustaining them.

Like Rabelais, Warde also resorts to wine analogies to reflect on the nature of print. The only thing other than wine “capable of stirring and altering men’s minds,” Warde insists, is “the coherent expression of thought” (12). To achieve this, typography should be as self-effacing as a crystal wine goblet which “is calculated to *reveal* rather than to hide the beautiful thing which it was meant to *contain*” (11). In contrast to such carefully decanted texts, the imperfections, blots, and flyspecks that disfigure the pages of *1450-1950* suggest an abundance or overflow, rather than containment, of “the beautiful thing.” “WHIRLING” like the “DRUNKEN SAILORS” evoked in another of *1450-1950*’s poems, Brown is not afraid to swill and slop his words. Indeed, pulling out the stopper on bottled books, as Brown aspires to do, will inevitably result in some spillage. Wastage is also the collateral damage of the “bloody revolution of the word” that Brown mobilizes in *The Readies* (1). “The words that will be spilt!” Brown exclaims (*The Readies*, 10). The revolution of *1450-*

1950, however, is more sanguine than it is sanguineous. Defying the predominant medium of the word since Gutenberg's invention, *1450-1950* is Brown's hearty potation to "words made free," an optimistic toast to the future possibilities of words released from the prohibition of type and its fixed points of view (*The Readies*, 10).